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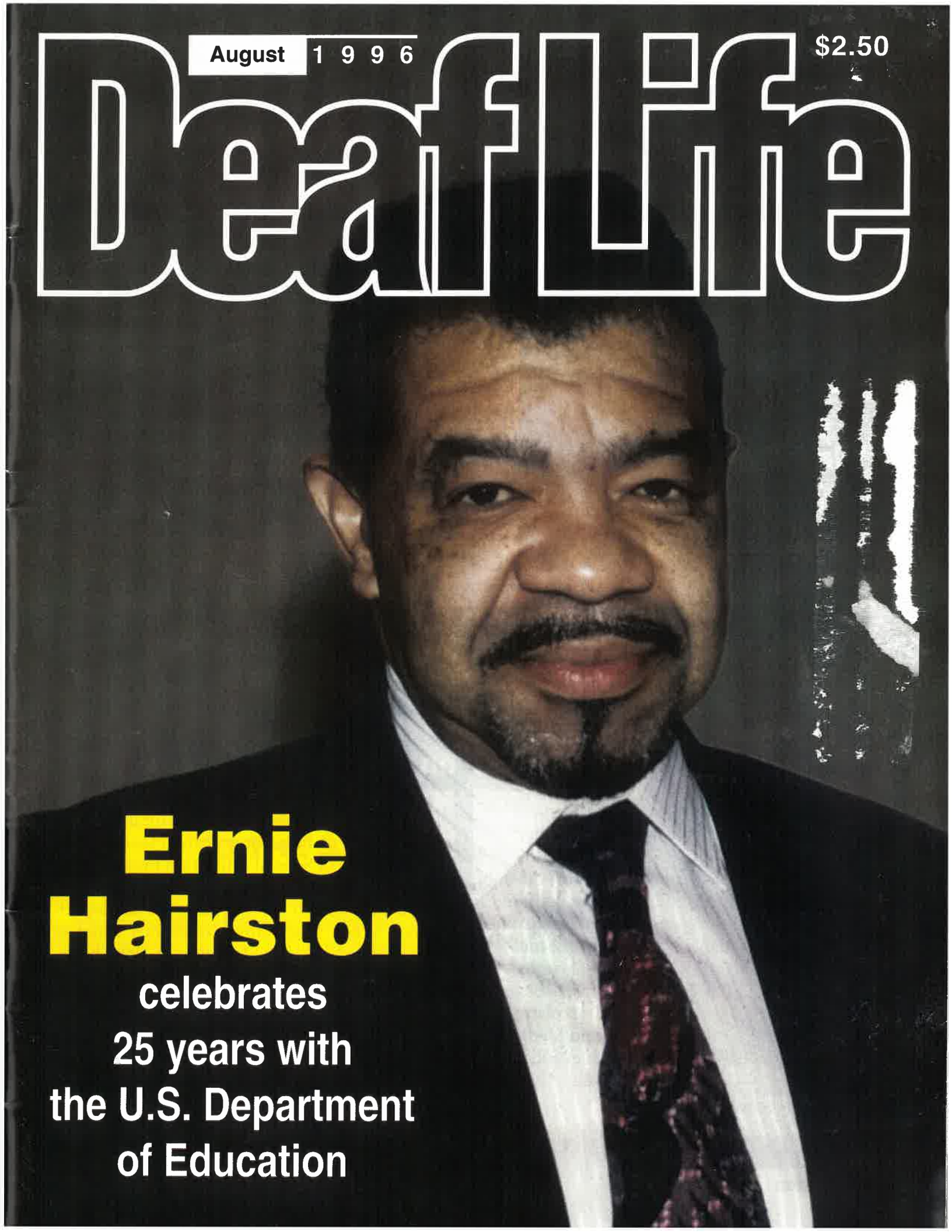
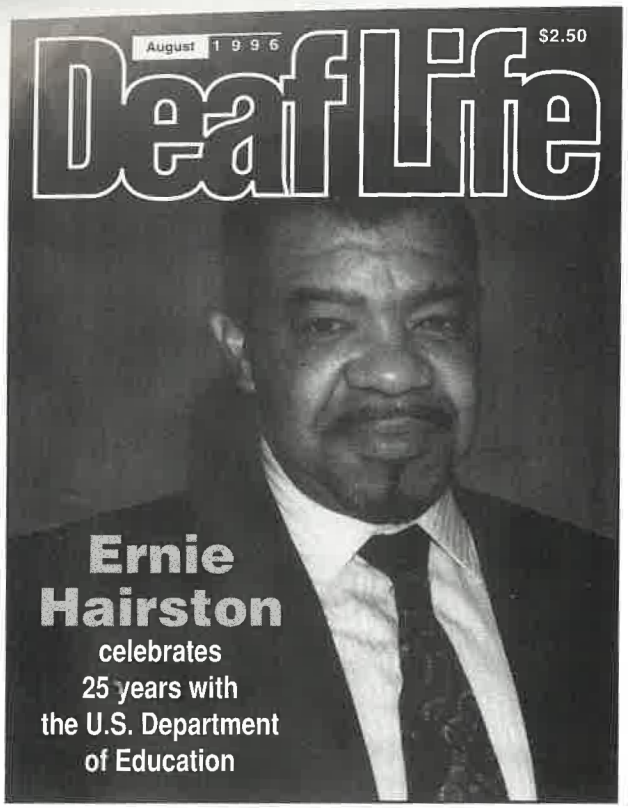


Ernie Hairston

celebrates 25 years with the U.S. Department of Education

VOLUME IX, NUMBER 2 AUGUST 1996



COVER

DESIGN BY MATTHEW S. MOORE
PHOTO COURTESY OF ERNIE HAIRSTON

IN MAY 1971, ERNIE HAIRSTON began work at the Bureau of Education of the Handicapped—now Office of Special Education Programs—in the U.S. Office of Education. Now Branch Chief of OSEP's Captioned Films and Media Services, he oversees a small but dedicated staff and an office that has impact on the lives of all deaf, hard-of-hearing, blind, and visually- or print-disabled citizens. OSEPS's influence extends into media, culture, theater, and, of course, education. Hairston looks back at a busy and accomplished career, and talks about his education, family, advocacy, and his predecessor and mentor, Mac Norwood. He explains what he does at Captioned Films and Media Services, and what life as Branch Chief is like.

10

Publisher's Note

The story of Ernie Hairston symbolizes the power of education to shape a person's destiny. He was born into a coal miner's family in West Virginia, deafened by spinal meningitis just before he began school, and received his early education at the West Virginia School for the Colored Deaf and Blind. Hairston thrived there. Even so, his prospects were modest. Deaf blacks didn't go to college; they learned skilled trades. Hairston planned to become a barber.

But those prospects changed dramatically in 1955, after the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was unconstitutional and Hairston was transferred to the West Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind. There he met the late Mac Norwood, then teaching English. Mac became his mentor and urged him to go to Gallaudet College, which had recently begun accepting blacks. He did.

He became a teacher and project director, working, for example, with multi-disabled deaf adults. After Mac became Branch Chief of Media Services and Captioned Films for the Deaf in the Bureau of Education of the Handicapped (now Office of Special Education Programs) in the U.S. Department of Education, he encouraged Hairston to fill a vacancy in his department. When Mac retired as Branch Chief in 1988, Hairston succeeded him. In 1994, he received his Ph.D. in Special Education Administration. This year, Hairston celebrates his 25th year at the Department of Education.

Matthew S. Moore

Ernie Hairston

25 years at BEH/OSEP: the Branch Chief looks back

Ernest E. Hairston, Jr.—known to friends as "Ernie"—is Chief of the Captioning and Adaptation Branch in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. He's a co-founder of the National Black Deaf Advocates, author, and Ph.D., and has also been a teacher, administrator, performer, and dancer. He gave the keynote speech at the recent Second Worldwide Deaf Theatre Conference, sponsored by the National Theatre of the Deaf, one of the programs overseen by his office. He succeeded the late Malcolm J. Norwood—his teacher and mentor—as Branch Chief, and is celebrating his 25th year at OSEP.

We recently interviewed Hairston by fax, asking him to share his thoughts on his successful career at the Captioning and Adaptation Branch, his early experiences, his family, and Mac Norwood's influence. The passages in italics are adapted from Hairston's chapter in **Great Deaf Americans: The Second Edition**.

Looking back on my 25 years with the Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (originally Bureau of Education for the Handicapped), I can appreciate the evolution of the captioned-films program that began operation with its first appropriation of $78,000 in 1959. When I started in May 1971, the appropriated budget was approximately $13 million annually to support such activities as research and development in the areas of captioning and media; training in the use and application of educational media, acquisition of media and materials, especially films for captioning and distribution. The Captioned Films and Media Services Branch had a staff of seven professionals and three support-staff members.

Currently, the Branch has a budget of $19 million, which supports, in addition to captioned films and videos, closed-captioned television programming for deaf, hard-of-hearing, and other individuals who can benefit, as well as audio-tapes and audio-described television programming for persons with visual and print disabilities. Despite the expansion in programs and dollars, the staffing pattern was streamlined to include four professionals and one support-staff member. Despite this downsizing, the quality of service remains high due to staff efficiency and dedication.

Ernest Elmer Hairston, Jr., was born on March 1, 1939, in Stotesbury, West Virginia, a company-owned coal-mining town 75 miles south of Charleston. His mother, Dorothy, was a housewife; his father, Ernest, Sr., a coal miner. He had a younger brother and sister. He says, "I had a typical childhood until I became deaf at the age of 5 as a result of spinal meningitis—that is, if living with racial segregation is typical." Stotesbury's whites weren't much better off than the blacks. As Hairston later noted, the Black community was self-sufficient: "We had our own stores, churches, barber shops—whatever we needed." Ironically, segregation didn't exist in the mines, where Ernest, Sr. worked alongside white miners, sending coal to the surface.

Dorothy and Ernest Hairston wanted their children to get the best possible education—the only way out of the mines and Stotesbury. Young Ernie was a bright child, but as he prepared to start first grade, he was stricken with spinal meningitis. Under the devoted care of Dorothy and the town doctor, he recovered, and when school opened, he enrolled. After a couple of weeks, when the teacher began assigning homework, he ran into difficulty. After discovering that Ernie was deaf, the doctor recommended that Dorothy send him to the West Virginia School for the Colored Deaf and Blind (WVSCDB), in Institute, near Charleston. At

Top: Everett, Marila, and Ernie Hairston. Bottom: Ernie as a young boy.

first, she was reluctant to send such a young child so far away, but finally relented.

"The move was the greatest thing that ever happened to me," Hairston later said. WVSCDB was located near West Virginia State College (traditionally Black), which shared campus facilities and student teachers with the children. "Fortunately, the student teachers knew little or nothing about deafness, so they came without preconceived ideas about deaf students. They taught as they normally would." He thrived, and became a "bookworm."

Because so very few went to college, let alone Gallaudet, most of the "colored" or "Negro" deaf schools "provided highly skilled vocational training to their students and assured that they were hired in their given profession upon graduation, whether with a diploma or certificate of completion." So at WVSCDB, the emphasis was on trades instead of college. Students were required to master two trades before graduation. Hairston chose tailoring and barbering.

However, in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education *that segregation was unconstitutional. West Virginia's schools were among the first to comply with the Court's integration order. In 1955, students from WVSCDB were transferred to the West Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind (WVSDB) in Romney. Having scored highest on WVSDB's placement tests, Hairston found himself in a one-year college-preparatory program.*

You know, being accustomed to segregation, I had no idea what to expect at WVSDB. However, from chance encounters at the bus station in transition and "uptown," I sensed that most white deaf persons did not have any "hang-up" about talking with African-American deaf persons. When the day finally arrived that we arrived on campus, we were introduced to our dorm rooms and roommates. The staff had the vision to ensure that rooms were integrated and students matched as closely as possible along age and achievement levels. My roommates included Paul from WVSCDB, and two students from WVSDB. I recall we hit off quite well. The house-parent, father-in-law of Mac's, taught me how to play chess and we would have matches some evenings after homework time. Mac was my English teacher as well as assistant principal. I believe because of my fondness for poetry and weak attempt at parodying a poem, he took special interest and added a special class for Paul, Rita, and myself. That class focused on English composition and at one time he brought in Dr. Doctor* to conduct a session. Mac was also the basketball coach. However, I, being one of the shortest players, was mostly a bench-warmer. I was more fortunate

With his old WVSCDB/WVSDB classmate Paul Adams (right) during a senior-class trip to Washington, D.C.

Fall 1956. With Gallaudet Prep classmates (Class of '61).

being a football player where I played a right tackle.

Then graduation was approaching and Mac wanted to know my plans. "Be a barber," I proudly announced. Mac would have no part of that and told me to go to Gallaudet. Rita, Paul, and I took the entrance test and all passed.

Mac "advised me to take up preparatory studies at Gallaudet, which would cover two more years of high-school education because 10th grade was as high as I could get at WVSDB."

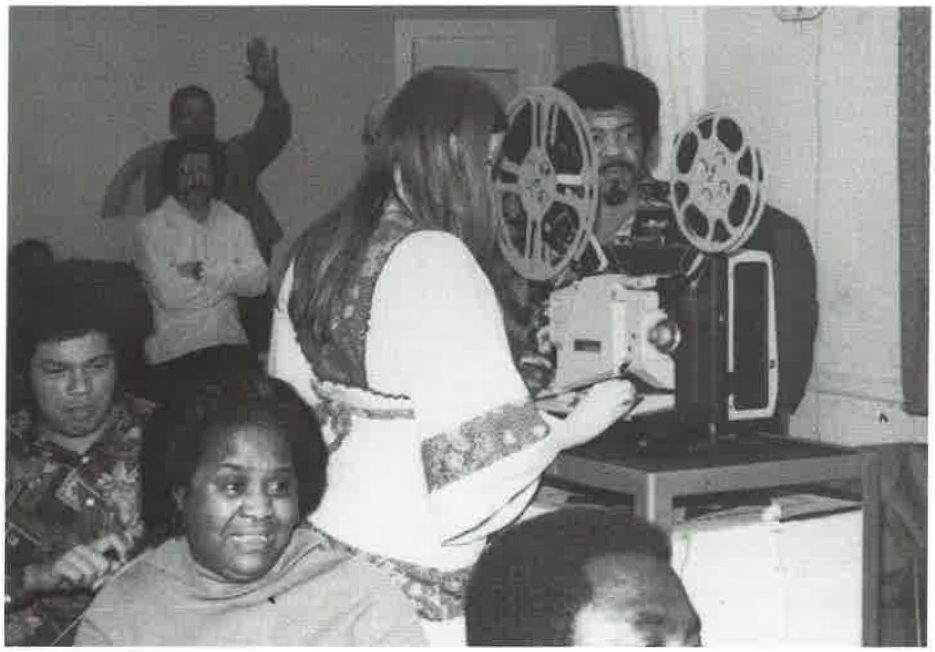
After one year at Romney, Hairston graduated at the top of his class, one of three WVSDB students selected for Gallaudet, which had only begun to accept black students in 1951 (Andrew Foster, Class of '54, being the first). He entered the Gallaudet Preparatory Program in Fall 1956.

At Gallaudet College, I was active, both academically and athletically—honor-roll student, varsity football and varsity wrestling, member of various clubs and Gallaudet Dance Troupe, Alpha Sigma Pi. Because of my academic standing, l was among those students who had opportunities to select their dorm room, and later dorm building—I, among those other students at the top, selected "Dawes House," which then was converted to a dorm for men. That was the only dorm that did not have a resident house-parent or supervisor. Fortunately, we were not a bawdy group, however fun-loving.

After starting as a freshman in Fall 1957, he joined the varsity football and wrestling teams. He played varsity football for two-and-a-half seasons until a knee injury permanently sidelined him. But he continued—and excelled—as a wrestler. He also loved the performing arts, participated in Drama Club productions, and, showing exceptional talent as a dancer, joined the Gallaudet Dance Troupe. He served two years as President of the Gallaudet Interfaith Council, and held various offices in the Alpha Sigma Phi fraternity. His barbering skills helped him earn pocket money from his classmates. He was popular, and a good student. During his senior year, he won the prestigious George Moredock Teegarden Award "in recognition of excellence in creative poetry." He graduated in 1961.

At the WGD in Helsinki that summer, he won a bronze medal in freestyle wrestling.

He then began his teaching career. His first job was teaching reading and literature to high-school-age deaf students, and science to ninth-graders, at the Governor Morehead School for the Deaf in Raleigh, North Carolina. He was the first black deaf teacher in the school's history. "Many of the black deaf students there saw me as a role model and aspired to go to college or further their education, seeing how college helped me



Ernie (behind projector) and Capital City Association of the Deaf members enjoy a captioned film and presentation by Sy DuBow.

'make it.'"

In 1964, he accepted a position with the Michigan Association for Better Hearing and Speech (MABHS) in Lansing, "as a teacher of low-verbal deaf adult males enrolled in the MABHS' federal project. When the federal project was terminated in 1966, the State took over and transferred the project to the State Technical Institute and Rehabilitation Center (STIRC). I became Head Teacher and Coordinator of that project. From January to August 1967, I attended the National Leadership Training Program at San Fernando Valley State College (now CSUN) and earned my Master's degree in Administration and Supervision.

"I returned to STIRC after the training. In June 1968, I was selected to become Project Director of the newly-established, federally-funded Diagnostic, Evaluation, and Adjustment Facility (D.E.A.F.) at the Goodwill Industries of Central Ohio Rehabilitation Center in Columbus. Prior to termination of the 3-year project, I helped facilitate the transfer of the project to the Columbus Hearing and Speech Center so that service to multi-disabled deaf adults could continue." During his last two years in Columbus, he also edited the Ohio Association of the Deaf's official newsletter, ***Buckeye State Bulletin****.*

In May 1971, Hairston was offered and accepted a position with the U.S. Office of Education's Bureau of Education for the Handicapped as Education Program Specialist.

I recall that when I attended my first CEASD convention in Flint, Michigan, Mac came up to me at a reception and asked, "When you were a student at WVSDB, did you ever think you would be here drinking beer with me?" Stunned at the question, I told him no, I didn't. I was a teacher at that time, yet still felt like a student when he asked.

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Ernie (third row, 5th from right) with other members of the U.S. Team at the 1961 World Games for the DEaf in Helsinki.

Years later, after I received my Master's degree from CSUN and ended my tenure with Project D.E.A.F in Columbus, Ohio, Mac asked me to apply for the job Ed Carney was resigning from to head C.O.S.D.† I applied, was offered, and told personnel, "I will think about it." Minutes later Mac called me and asked, "What the *hell* do you mean by saying you'll think about it?" Flustered, I replied that I thought that was what I was supposed to do instead of being too eager in my acceptance. A few weeks later I was in Washington working in the Office of Education's Bureau of Education for the Handicapped. He was my mentor from then on.

Entering federal services from the fields of education and rehabilitation, which are very student- or client-oriented and result-oriented, I originally experienced a strange feeling of "non-productivity" during my first week, which was spent reviewing project files to familiarize myself with the program, writing routine reports, and attending meetings, But after being assigned specific projects, sent on site visits, writing site-visit reports, managing grants and contracts, I realized the importance and impact of my work and responsibilities.

Dr. Norwood played a significant role in my advancement through the Branch by assigning increasingly more complicated projects and letting me work independently. When he became assistant branch chief and eventually chief of the Branch, he enjoyed telling the story of how he was brought on board as the first deaf professional within the Office of Education. He said that his supervisor told him that he was hired because of his proven leadership in the field of education of the deaf, but cautioned him not to aspire to move up within the Office of Education. When he retired he encouraged me to compete for his position.

When Dr. Norwood retired in January 1988, Hairston became Acting Branch Chief of the Captioning and Adaptation Branch. In August 1989, he officially became the Branch Chief.

As Chief of the Captioning and Adaptation Branch, Hairston plans, directs, and implements Part F of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which includes developing policies and strategies for providing media-technology and captioning services to deaf and hard-of-hearing persons, as well as video-described and audio-recorded services to blind, visually-handicapped, and print-disabled persons. "These services include closed-captioned television program-

ming and research in media technology. The National Theatre of the Deaf's Professional Theatre School and performance preparation is funded through this Branch, as are several regional and local cultural projects."

1996 marked Hairston's 25th year with the U.S. Department of Education.

You asked what exactly do I do. Well, as Chief of the Captioning and Adaptation Branch I oversee and manage activities conducted and funded by the branch and its staff members. Basically, I am charged with providing captioning and educational-media services to people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, and audio-tapes and audio description to visually or print-disabled individuals. These are handled through competitive grants contracts, or cooperative agreements. I supervise a staff of three professionals who share the responsibilities of managing and monitoring these activities. Included among these activities are the National Theatre of the Deaf's Professional Theatre School and outreach activities, various local and regional theatrical/cultural groups, closed-captioned television programming, research in captioning and media technology, audio-described television programming, home videos, etc.

I also draft and review program priorities and regulations for review and consideration by senior officials. Yes, there is a lot of paperwork despite the advent of computerized offices, e-mail, Internet access. The work requires a better-than-average command of the English language by myself as well as my staff, since we have to prepare several documents for review by our superiors and theirs. My staff must prepare pre-funding and funding documents for my review along with recommendations. Their recommendations are based on their review of proposals and grant applications. So you can see this requires a high literacy level. I also receive a lot of voice and TTY calls, but most of my "voice" calls relate to various projects which my staff usually handle. Whereas [when] I respond to voice calls,

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I have an interpreter available. E-mail has reduced the number of calls considerably. There are meetings of all kinds to attend, including staff meetings, various team meetings, training, conferences, etc. Also, there are individuals—including grantees or contractors—who come by the office for face-to face meetings individually or as a group. They include both deaf and hearing constituents. In-house meetings also include both deaf and hearing employees—mostly hearing, of course. Occasionally, I take paperwork home. Mostly, they are documents to be reviewed for discussion at upcoming meetings.

There is no typical day here, but normally, I would say: Arrive in the office about 8:30 a.m., check my e-mail, TTY messages, appointment calendar, and message board. Respond to e-mail messages that require responses. Work on unfinished business (mostly correspondence, reports, responses to inquiries, pending documents such as draft reports from team members, etc.), meet with staff members on an as-needed basis, respond to calls, drop-ins, new e-mail, etc. Lunch (sometimes with co-workers, sometimes at my desk, sometimes none 'til late afternoon). Afternoons vary—sometimes a continuation of morning activities, sometime meetings of various kinds, training, or planning. Also, there is the required "mandatory" training in various areas I must attend. They can last from a few hours to a few days.

I enjoy what I am doing, the variety of activities, the challenge, and the fact that we are providing needed services to our customers—individuals with sensory disabilities. Unlike my experience as an educator and my experience as an administrator of a rehabilitation facility, my experience with the Federal government provides me with a wider perspective of how government works and the impact it has on society, and with opportunities to meet and interact with a wide variety of people and professions. The experience has benefited me personally, educationally, and professionally.

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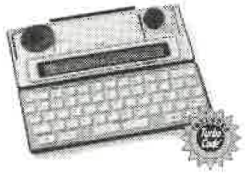

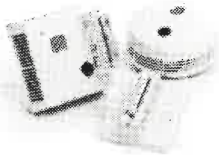

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Top left: With Shirley Allen in *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*. Top right: With Linwood Smith in another scene. Bottom: With Deaf-theater attendees of the Project Directors for Cultural Experience Meeting in Baltimore.

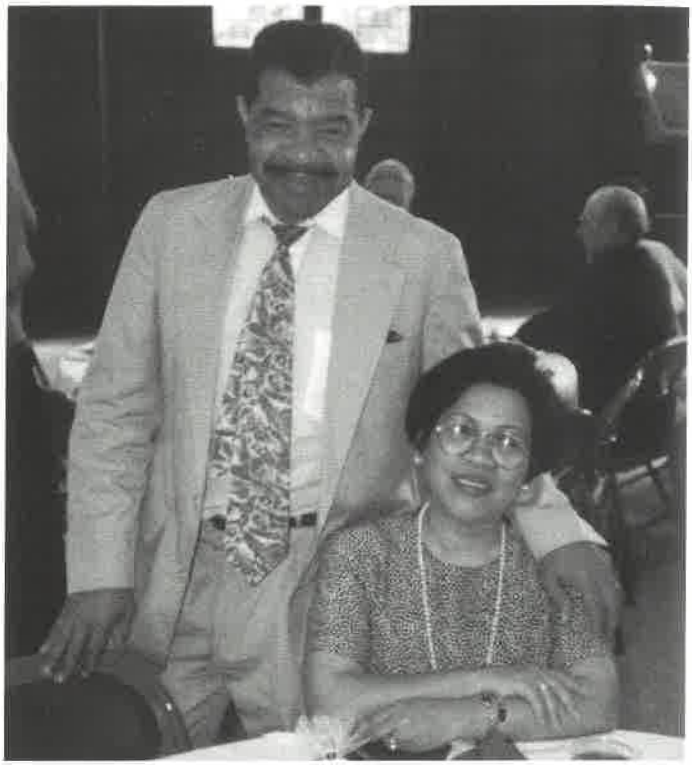
Hairston has written numerous articles and reports—for example, "Instructional Media for Mentally Retarded Deaf Children" (1972); "Digital Technologies: Impacting on Communication Needs for Persons with Developmental Disabilities" (1991); and "The Future: Hidden Captions, Videodiscs, Microcomputer, and Telecommunications." He and Mac Norwood co-authored "Career Education for the Deaf in the '70's," in ***American Annals of the Deaf****. He and Linwood Smith co-authored "Ethnic Minorities Amongst the Deaf Population" (****Deafness Annual****, 1976); and* ***Black and Deaf in America: Are We That Different?*** *(T.J. Publishers, 1983), which won a 1985 Book Award from the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped.*

He's a member of National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA), NAD, TDI, GUAA, and Kappa Delta Pi Honorary Society (Pi Rho Chapter), Mabuhay, Inc. (a Filipino-American association), and D.C. Area Black Deaf Advocates. In August 1985, he chaired NBDA's Annual National Conference, and received its Award of Appreciation.

A karate enthusiast, he took First Place Trophy in Senior Men's Sparring Contest at the TKA 1975 Karate Tournament. He won the Director's Award of Recognition for his role as lead actor in the 1974 production of ***Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*** *at Hughes Memorial Theatre in Washington.*

Since 1989, he's worked as Sign Master for several sign-interpreted plays: ***Playboy of the West Indies****;* ***The Glass Menagerie****;* ***Before It Hits Home****;* ***The Seagull****;* ***Jar the Floor****;* ***Blood Knot****;* ***A Small World****; and* ***I am a Man*** *at the Arena Stage in Washington;* ***Once on This Island*** *and* ***Marvin's Room*** *at the Kennedy Center (1992);* ***Daddy, Daddy, Go Away,***

With Dr. Glenn B. Anderson



With Mencie at Ole Jim.

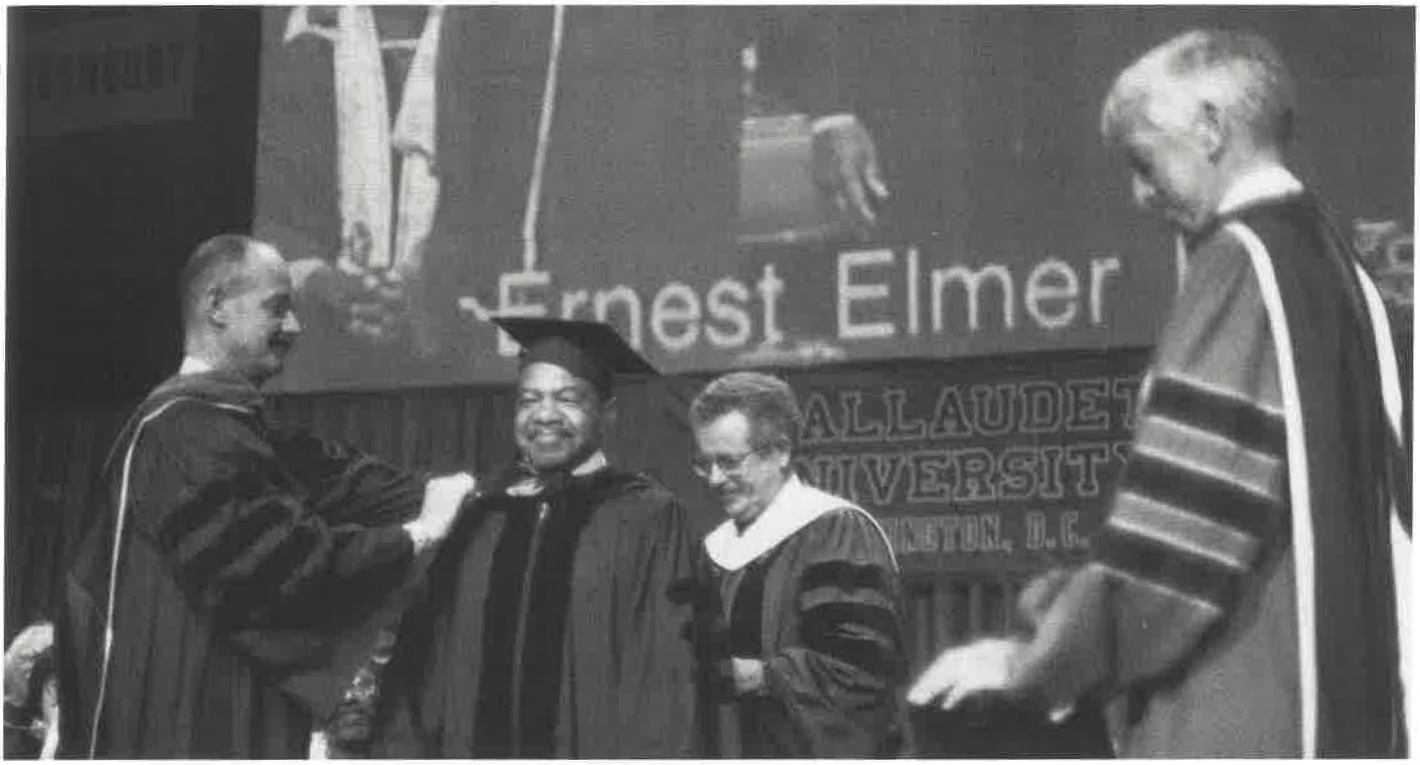
I Don't Like the Games You Play *at the Living Stage (1992); and* ***Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*** *(1992);* ***To Be Young, Gifted and Black*** *(1993);* ***Equus*** *(1995); and* ***Ties That Bind*** *(1996) at the University of Maryland.*

He and his wife, Mencie Yaguil-Hairston, have four daughters: Darlene, Mayumi, Malaya, and Tala. They live in the Washington suburb of Bowie, Maryland. "Without taking time off from work or family, I enrolled in Gallaudet University's doctoral program and earned a Ph.D. in Special Education Administration in May, 1994."

When I first came to Washington, I became very involved with the deaf community, performing, for Hughes Theatre when they produced "Black" plays. I had the lead role in ***The American Dream*** and ***Ceremonies in Dark Old Men***. Both were directed by Debbie Sonnenstrahl. Also, I performed with ***Good Vibration***, a sign-language musical revue led by Cynthia Saltzman. I was very active with Capital City Association of the Deaf (CCAD), a Black deaf club (whites were not excluded). Later on, I, along with several other Black deaf members of CCAD, decided something more was needed since CCAD was mostly social. We founded Black Deaf Advocates and held the first Black Deaf Conference at Howard University in June 1981. The following year, the first National Black Deaf Conference was held in Cleveland, Ohio. Currently, there are chapters in several cities, and more continue to be formed. I also joined Thompkin Karate Association (TKA), followed by my daughter, Darlene, who was age 7 at that time. I worked my way up to first-degree brown belt and eventually won Senior Men's Championships. Darlene worked up to second-degree brown belt. When I became more involved with my doctoral studies, I had to drop out of karate classes.

Earning my doctorate was one of my proud moments. I was more relieved than anything, since I thought I'd never finish that dissertation. I take pride in my dissertation because I believe it contains useful information—such as a comparison of self-concept measurements between Black deaf students and white deaf students along racial lines, academic settings, and gender.

In 1995, Hairston returned to WVSDB to give the keynote address at its Fall Conference celebrating its 125th anniversary. He said: "Each student's educational experience is vital because education is an empowerment tool. It enables one to move ahead in his/her career or to obtain additional education. To paraphrase Jesse Jackson, education is something that cannot be



"A proud moment:" Receiving his doctoral hood in May 1994. Dr. I. King Jordan is at right. (Note real-time-captioned video-screen in the background.)

taken away or robbed from you. Education is power. Unlike money, a car, a house, privileges, and other tangibles that can be earned, and can also be taken, education—once obtained—is securely yours. This concept should be instilled in students, along with the importance of making learning a life-long process. A way of keeping ahead."

My family is very close-knit and achievement-oriented. Darlene just received her Master's in Guidance Counseling. Mayumi was accepted in the 8-week summer-internship program at the University of Kentucky for biomedical-engineering research. She will be a senior at Georgetown Visitation School this fall but has already completed all her high-school honor math courses, including calculus. Malaya received the Presidential Academic Achievement Award and the Principal's Award from her school for maintaining a 4.0 GPA all year. She was also chosen one of 10 King scholars for her academic and social achievements. She plays both the piano and the violin. Tala has been accepted in Martin Luther King Academic Center's Latin program. She also plays two instruments: piano and flute. She is also a computer whiz. Mencie founded the Mabuhay Cultural School and recently conducted a national workshop/seminar for foster parents of Filipino children in Allentown, Pennsylvania, with Mabuhay members who volunteered to accompany her.

Mayumi was once asked by a local community paper as to what was the best advice her father had given her. She replied: "Beauty ain't enough." My wife and I both come from backgrounds that encourage using one's "gifts" to the best of one's abilities. We believe that the family should be actively involved with their children's education and encourage excellence, but not to the point of "pushing" them. Learning should be fun and self-fulfilling.■

Deaf Life All photos courtesy of Ernie Hairston.

*Dr. Powrie Vaux Doctor ("Doc"), a legendary hearing professor at Gallaudet College. The Powrie V. Doctor Chair of Deaf studies is named in his honor.

†Council of Organizations Serving the Deaf, which was incorporated in 1967 and disbanded in 1973, after its federal funding was terminated. It represented the first real attempt to bring together every major deaf-oriented organization into a national coordinating council. Mervin D. Garretson was its first Executive Director, but left in 1970 to become principal of the newly-opened MSSD in 1970. He was succeeded by Ed Carney, who headed COSD until it disbanded.